

## Lincoln and Universal Salvation, Part 1

Commentary for April 16, 2020 — Abraham Lincoln, President, 1861 to 1865

Below is an April 2009 article citing testimonies of Lincoln's belief in universal salvation.

### Background

First, let me give some context to this Commentary. I joined Ken Klein in Washington D.C. to facilitate interviews of Dr. Ward Sanford (hydrologist) and Professor George Buchanan (his footage was not used) for Ken's documentary "[Jerusalem and the Lost Temple of the Jews](#)" (2013). Ken arranged for Joseph Farah, founder and CEO of "[World Net Daily](#)," to introduce the documentary.



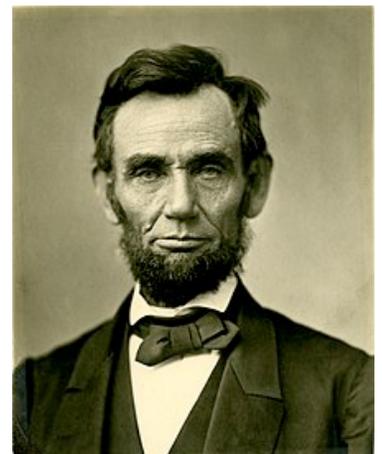
Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C.

Mr. Farah gave an excellent statement that opened the video, recorded from the north portico of the Lincoln Memorial with the camera looking east across the reflecting pool toward the Washington Monument, and to the United States Capital Building. While they were setting up the sound, lighting, and video equipment for the recording, I visited the Lincoln Memorial bookstore.

I remembered reading a few years before that Abraham Lincoln believed in universal salvation through Christ (called "universalism" in Lincoln's day). I wanted to confirm that information. In the bookstore, I looked for material about Lincoln's religious beliefs. I found none, not even in the largest biographies. I asked the bookstore staff for help. Both of them loved Lincoln and were knowledgeable about details of his life, yet neither knew of such a book. They phoned a U.S. Park Service expert for help, but that person did not know of such a book. I thought that was strange because of the article I saw years earlier.

A few years later I found articles dealing with Lincoln's religious beliefs. One interesting article was "[Abraham Lincoln's Religion: The Case for His Ultimate Belief in a Personal, Sovereign God](#)" by Samuel W. Calhoun and Lucas E. Morel, in the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* (Vol. 33, No. 1, 2012). Calhoun and Morel wrote:

**"It is commonplace to say that the religion of Abraham Lincoln will forever be a mystery. Adam Gopnik thinks that Lincoln's faith is 'the most vexed question in all the Lincoln literature.' Richard Carwardine writes that Lincoln's 'personal faith ... necessarily remain[s] a puzzle.' We believe that such assertions are overstated. While important ambiguities remain, such as whether Lincoln was a Christian in the sense of trusting Jesus as his Savior, some elements of Lincoln's**



**religious faith are beyond doubt.”** (page 38)

Yet the authors conclude, as the title states, **“Lincoln, by the end of his life, believed in a personal, sovereign God.”** (footnote 13 of the article) Did Lincoln’s beliefs about God include universal salvation? As you will read, this seems to be the case.

However, there is evidence that Lincoln’s beliefs about God went far beyond an understanding of God’s sovereignty over His creation. Those who knew Lincoln in adulthood before his presidency give evidence to his belief in God’s sovereignty extending to the universal salvation of all humanity.

Now we come to the article. I reformatted the text to my usual Commentary layout. *DWS*

## **“Abraham Lincoln, Universalist (b. February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865)”**

### **Independent Testimonies of Abraham Lincoln’s Belief in the Salvation of All**

by Clyde Pilkington, Jr., April 2009

**“That in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.”**

• **Matthew 18:16**

Occasionally over the years, my study of Universal Reconciliation has led me to the man, Abraham Lincoln. As our country celebrates the bicentennial of his birth, I thought it might be appropriate to share some of the resources I have found regarding his belief in the salvation of all. Many do not know that for almost all of Abraham Lincoln’s life he held a firm conviction that 1 Corinthians 15:22 was the bedrock of Christ’s redemptive work. He found great hope, expounding upon its theme.

What follows is a list of five independent testimonies spanning a period of thirty years of Abraham Lincoln’s life, witnessing to his belief that all men would ultimately be saved through the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **1. Mentor Graham’s Testimony**

Mentor Graham (1800–1886) was an early schoolmaster of Abraham Lincoln who eventually became intimate friends with him. Lincoln boarded with him for two years. In later years, he assisted Lincoln in his speech writing. Here is Graham’s Testimony:

**“Abraham Lincoln was living at my house at New Salem, going to school, studying English grammar and surveying, in the year 1833. One morning he said to me, ‘Graham, what do you think about the anger of the Lord?’**

**I replied, ‘I believe the Lord never was angry or mad and never would be; that His loving-kindness endureth forever; that He never changes.’**

**Said Lincoln, ‘I have a little manuscript written, which I will show you,’ and stated he thought of having it published. The size of the manuscript was about one half quire [24 sheets] of foolscap [inexpensive writing paper], written in a very plain hand, on the subject of Christianity, and a defense of universal salvation.**

The commencement of it was something respecting the God of the universe never being excited, mad or angry. I had the manuscript in my possession some week or ten days. I have read many books on the subject of theology, and I don't think, in point of perspicuity [simple speaking] and plainness of reasoning, I ever read one to surpass it. I remember well his argument.

He took the passage, [1 Corinthians 15:22] 'As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,' and followed up with the proposition that whatever the breach or injury of Adam's transgressions to the human race was, which no doubt was very great, was made just and right by the atonement of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Erasmus Manford's Testimony

Erasmus Manford (1815–1884) was a capable Bible teacher, author, and publisher, who taught the salvation of all. His periodicals had extensive circulations.<sup>2</sup> He is best known for his 1849 work, 150 Reasons for Believing in the Final Salvation of All Mankind. Abraham Lincoln was one of his supporters, himself attending his lectures. In Manford's autobiography he recounts Lincoln's attendance to one of his addresses on universal reconciliation:

"Manford was discussing the proposition of the restitution of all things to God which is manifested in Christ Jesus our Lord ... 'I remember well seeing Mr. Lincoln then punctually every day and night. He often nodded his head to me when I made a strong point.'"<sup>3</sup>

## 3. Jonathan Harnett's Testimony

Jonathan Harnett was a Lincoln associate and business man from Pleasant Plains, IL. Harnett retold of his 1858 conversation with Lincoln and some of their associates:

"[Lincoln] ... closed with the restitution of all things to God, as the doctrine taught in the Scriptures, and if anyone was left in doubt in regard to his belief in the atonement of Christ and the final salvation of all men, he removed those doubts in a few questions he answered and propounded to others. After expressing himself, some one or two took exceptions to his position, and he asked a few questions that cornered his interrogators and left no room to doubt or question his soundness on the atonement of Christ, and salvation finally of all men.

He did not pretend to know just when that event would be consummated, but that it would be the ultimate result, that Christ must reign supreme, high over all. The Savior of all; and the supreme Ruler, he could not be with one out of the fold; all must come in, with his understanding of the doctrine taught in the Scriptures."<sup>4</sup>

## 4. Isaac Cogdal's Testimony

Isaac Cogdal was a longtime friend of Lincoln, who recounts his 1859 conversation with him:

<sup>1</sup> A signed letter of Mentor Graham, published by William Eleazar Barton in The Soul of Abraham Lincoln (1920), 346–347. [Barton points out that Lincoln was not a theologian or logician but hereasoned on the basis of very simple and elementary principles (Barton, 272). DWS]

<sup>2</sup> His periodicals: *Christian Teacher*, *Golden Era*, *Manford's Monthly Magazine*, *Western Universalist*.

<sup>3</sup> Barton, *Soul of Lincoln*, 350; citing Erasmus Manford *Twenty-five Years in the West*, (1867), 219.

<sup>4</sup> William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People* (Doubleday & Company Inc, 1959), 105–106.

**"Lincoln expressed himself ... He did not nor could not believe in the endless punishment of any one of the human race. He understood punishment for sin to be a Bible doctrine; that the punishment was parental in its object, aim and design, and intended for the good of the offender; hence it must cease when justice is satisfied. He added that all that was lost by the transgression of Adam was made good by the atonement: all that was lost by the fall was made good by the sacrifice."<sup>5</sup>**

## 5. James Shrigley's Testimony

James Shrigley (1813–1905) was a Universalist minister, U.S. Army chaplain, historian and author. He served churches in Exeter, NH (1838–39); Baltimore, MD (1841–48); Reading, PA (1850–54) and (1856–58); Philadelphia, PA (1854–56); and Richmond, VA (1858–61).

During the Civil War, Shrigley was appointed by Abraham Lincoln as a United States Army chaplain. A group of Protestant ministers traveled to Washington hoping to dissuade President Abraham Lincoln from making the appointment. The President asked on what grounds they were opposed to Shrigley. They replied that Shrigley believed in the salvation of all souls, and that even the rebels would be saved! Lincoln's response was that, if that be so, then Shrigley deserved to be a Chaplain in the U.S. Army.<sup>6</sup>

[End article]

## Conclusion

Lincoln's religious views were complex and private, between an individual and God. A prolific letter writer, Lincoln rarely shared his deepest religious beliefs in private letters. Many thought of Lincoln as a heroic figure and this muddled the historical record through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recent scholarship on Lincoln has made the understanding of Lincoln's beliefs clearer, but many questions remain (see "[The Faith of Abraham Lincoln](#)").

Let me give one more reference. A major biographer of Lincoln, William H. Herndon, was a friend and law partner of Lincoln's for 20 years before his first presidential term. Herndon wrote a large, influential, but much-criticized 3-volume work, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*. It told stories about Lincoln from Herndon's experiences with him over two decades, as well as collected letters and interviews from Lincoln's friends, and Lincoln's wife Mary Todd Lincoln. Lincoln's religious beliefs are presented in [volume 3, pages 438–446](#),<sup>7</sup> confirming Lincoln's study of two well-known Boston Unitarian/Universalist theologians, Dr. W.E. Channing and Theodore Parker.

In Part 2 more evidence will be presented.

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<sup>5</sup> Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Nelson C. Simonson, *Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography* (Unitarian Universalist Historical Society).

<sup>7</sup> Historian Douglas Wilson writes that Herndon was a dedicated researcher, interviewing hundreds of Lincoln's acquaintances, including their letters to and from Lincoln. The books portray Lincoln as a real man and not a saint. See the article "William H. Herndon and His Lincoln Informants," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* (Volume 14, Issue 1, Winter 1993, 15–34).